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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 ABU DHABI 000711

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#) [AE](#)

SUBJECT: UAE-IRAQ RELATIONS ON THE EVE OF FRIENDS OF IRAQ CONFERENCE

REF: A) NEW DELHI 1606 (AMBASSADORIAL CANDIDATE)  
B) BAGHDAD 1760 (ZEBARI ON ARAB EMBASSIES)  
C) BAGHDAD 1734 (FM ABDULLAH IN BAGHDAD)  
D) ABU DHABI 631 (TARIQ AL-HASHEMI MAY VISIT)  
E) ABU DHABI 593 (SATTERFIELD DISCUSSIONS IN ABU DHABI)  
F) ABU DHABI 393 (SEEKING HELP WITH IRAQI REFUGEES)  
G) ABU DHABI 356 (GULF SECURITY DIALOGUE READ-OUT)  
H) ABU DHABI 296 (SCENE SETTER FOR GULF SECURITY DIALOGUE)  
I) 06 ABU DHABI 3629 (IRAQ COMPACT PREPARATORY MEETING)

Classified by Charge d'Affaires Martin Quinn, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) As the U.S. and Iraq prepare to co-host, on UAE soil, the Friends of Iraq Conference June 17-19, we offer a few thoughts on the UAE's policy vis-a-vis Iraq and potential opportunities to deepen mutual engagement between the two nations. The Conference follows closely after UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed's June 5 visit to Baghdad (ref C), an attempt to open up a relationship that has been stymied by miscommunication and mutual distrust. That visit, in tandem with the hopeful opening of a UAE embassy in Baghdad and a possible visit by PM Maliki to the UAE, could help create a fresh dynamic in Baghdad-Abu Dhabi dialogue. Overcoming mistrust of a Shi'a dominated government, however, and putting aside security concerns to fully staff an active embassy, will take time.

12. (S) NAMING AN AMBASSADOR. The UAE has taken a bold step in committing to name an envoy to Iraq, and is reviewing a short list -- with its Ambassador to India reportedly a prime candidate. The list consists of men of military background, of which there are a handful in Ambassadorial ranks. MFA personnel note that military minds will be able to adapt to the security environment in Baghdad, whereas there is a general concern among career diplomats that the assignment would be too risky -- not to mention decidedly less comfortable than the plush lifestyle they tend to enjoy elsewhere. We should press the UAE to name the Ambassador quickly, hopefully during the timeframe of the FoI conference, but should not expect him to be resident in Baghdad immediately (we were told "within three to four weeks of nomination in one recent conversation with the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince's International Affairs Director Yousef al-Otaiba). AbZ had noted at one point that an Ambassador could initially be non-resident and travel in and out of Baghdad. Current UAE thinking may be leaning more in favor of having the envoy resident in Iraq, yet we must continue to encourage the UAE to not only be present in Baghdad, but be active and consistent in that presence. All of the reasons for being there (articulated in an AbZ-Satterfield meeting on May 7, ref E), gain greater credence if the UAE envoy is consistently resident.

13. (S) OPENING AN ACTIVE EMBASSY. An Ambassador alone does not an embassy make. The UAE has been working for some time to identify a location for an Embassy within the International Zone (IZ). A survey mission in August 2007 returned without conclusion and the UAE has since complained of poor follow-up by the GoI. AbZ was reportedly pleased to be shown an actual embassy site by FM Zebari during their June 5 tour of the IZ, and AbZ's enthusiasm indicates a desire to have a brick-and-mortar presence immediately available. Any assistance the USG can provide in the IZ will be appreciated, including engagement with a new UAE ambassador and his staff to strengthen their sense of meaningful interaction as a result of being there. The many MFA concerns about naming a diplomat as ambassador

also apply to naming staff members, and we would anticipate non-diplomats seconded to fill some (possibly even most) of the assignments in a new UAE Embassy. The old Embassy has been without diplomatic staff since the May 2006 kidnapping (and subsequent release) of the UAE Charge -- also seconded from a non-MFA agency.

14. (C) ENERGIZING THE IRAQI EMBASSY IN ABU DHABI. Diplomacy is a two-way street, and there is much that might have been done to strengthen relations even without an active UAE Embassy in Baghdad. Unfortunately, the under-utilized Iraqi Embassy in Abu Dhabi, currently without an Ambassador, has been plagued by limited resources and little guidance / authority from the MFA. A dedicated Charge d'Affaires is holding things together with a limited staff, yet often complains of being kept in the dark. He is not always aware of the travel of senior Iraqi officials to the UAE and was initially dependent on the U.S. Embassy for information on the FoI conference -- including who might attend from his own government. If the GoI is to benefit from stronger diplomatic engagement with the UAE, much progress depends on the institutional maturity of the Iraqi Foreign Ministry to utilize overseas missions effectively.

15. (S) MAKING VISITS COUNT. Inviting deeper engagement through reciprocal visits will require that those visits gain traction on real issues. One of the UAE's stated reasons for hesitance in deepening its role in Baghdad has been the leadership's frustration with what they perceived as a less than forthright exchange with NSA Mowaffaq al-Ruba'i in June, 2007. They had a sense that they were being preached to rather than engaged, and were not left with confidence in the cross-sectarian credentials of the GoI. During any visit, al-Maliki will be scrutinized for his practical approach to meetings, sense of protocol (he has been derided in Abu Dhabi for almost a year for requesting a visit on a weekend), and his

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articulation of the national interests of Iraq -- as opposed to sectarian interests he is too strongly associated with here. He will also need to carefully explain his recent visit to Iran; while the UAE Prime Minister (with AbZ) made a trip to Iran earlier this year and UAE economic engagement with Iran is significant, they will nonetheless see al-Maliki's visit as somewhat more suspect. Other senior Iraqi visitors should take care to convey a similarly convincing picture of Iraq's national ambitions rather than displaying sectarian colors.

16. (S) KEEPING FM ZEBARI AND THE MFA ENGAGED. UAE FM Abdullah (AbZ) expressed some satisfaction with FM Zebari's engagement with the GCC in Bahrain in late April (ref E), suggesting that perceived barriers to dialogue with the GoI may be breaking down. Zebari's very attentive hosting of AbZ in Baghdad on June 5 hopefully deepened their sense of personal trust. That said, we do not recall Zebari having visited the UAE within the last two years and that may have resulted in lost opportunities. Nurturing a more engaged Iraqi Embassy in the UAE -- and appointment of an Ambassador -- are also critical to lashing the two FM's together institutionally. Both sides can take increasingly bold steps when personal and institutional relations are warm.

17. (C) CONFERENCES HAVE SOME IMPACT. The UAE (somewhat reluctantly) hosted the September 10, 2006 Iraq Compact preparatory meeting in Abu Dhabi, bringing together Iraqi officials and the international community for a focused discussion on assistance to Iraq. The GoI was represented by NSA Mowaffaq al-Ruba'i and DPM Barham Saleh, among others. While that meeting led to no breakthroughs in UAE policy, it helped break the ice with Iraq to a certain degree. AbZ's expressed appreciation for Zebari's contribution to recent GCC+2+1 meetings in Bahrain stresses again the value of shared dialogue, as does the UAE's permission for the USG and GoI to host the Friends of Iraq conference June 17-19. Close USG consultations with the UAE on key Iraq-related issues are also of enduring value.

18. (S) MULTIPLE IRAQI VOICES IN ABU DHABI. Iyad Allawi is still the darling of many Emiratis and perceived as a potential future leader. Allawi is often in town benefiting from the opulent hospitality of his hosts and sharing his thoughts on GoI imperfections and his own leadership potential. Post, along with USG visitors, have frequently reminded the UAEG that Allawi needs to be present in Baghdad to have

a political impact in Baghdad. We need to keep making that pitch. VP Tariq al-Hashemi is another periodic visitor to the UAE, during whose visits we can only hope that time is spent discussing national leadership issues and not commiserating among Sunnis about the dominance of the Shi'a. VP al-Hashemi is not necessarily a natural ally of his Sunni brethren in the UAE -- he has been called a "Muslim Brother" (code for Islamist) by Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ), the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi.

¶9. (C) A LARGE RESIDENT IRAQI COMMUNITY. The UAE also hosts a very large resident Iraqi community, previously estimated at around 40,000 yet recently described by the Iraqi Charge d'Affaires as over 100,000 Iraqi nationals. These are not refugees (which are not generally recognized in the UAE regardless of national origin) but tend to be businessmen, doctors, and academics, many with long-standing residency in the UAE. The first mayor of Baghdad after liberation was in fact from the UAE, and many are keen to keep strong emotional and business ties to the homeland. GoI visitors should, in fact, address the Iraqi community here during their visits to keep the dialogue flowing. Increasing investment flows should be another rationale for GoI focus on resident Iraqis.

¶10. (S) LIMITING IRAQI VISAS. The UAEG has expressed to us its concern about the number of Iraqis seeking entry into the UAE, and has taken action to limit that number. In addition to an already burgeoning Iraq community, clear security fears about admitting unvetted Iraqi nationals, and concern over sectarian strife playing out in the UAE, the UAE does not recognize refugee status and does not wish to become home to a transient population of asylum seekers. Post has had a chronically difficult time assisting Iraqi delegations with UAE visas (a chore that a well resourced Iraqi Embassy should be able to accomplish); while many Iraqi travelers are eventually admitted, UAE concerns will not likely diminish over the short term. The UAE has been extremely generous in admitting, and in fact inviting, medical patients needing urgent care or reconstructive surgery. The Red Crescent points to over 300 such cases in recent years, one recent example of which originated with a USG appeal for assistance in the case of a young Iraqi girl. The Red Crescent accommodated the case immediately and paid all expenses -- including travel of the family.

¶11. (S) DEBT RELIEF WILL TAKE TIME. The UAE has not been demanding interest on the over \$3.5 billion debt owed to it by Iraq, yet neither has the UAE shown interest in forgiving that debt outright. The tired excuse for some time had been that the UAE did not want to get out ahead of the GCC, but since Saudi Arabia took steps to consider debt relief the UAEG refrain has focused on distrust in al-Maliki (the UAE did not want to give al-Maliki a boost when the UAE was not convinced he would use the gains "to the benefit of all Iraqis"). While it is prudent to touch softly on the debt relief

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question in discussions with top UAEG leaders, we might tread lightly until the UAEG can build a more trusting relationship with the GoI -- through diplomatic exchanges, reciprocal visits, and further evidence of the GoI's non-sectarian focus. The environment should then be improved to press harder for UAE consideration of debt relief. (In another indirect form of assistance, the UAE did pledge \$10 million to UN efforts to assist Iraqi refugees in Syria during a July 2007 visit to Damascus by the UAE President.)

¶12. (S) IRAN A STICKING POINT. The UAEG (especially the leadership in Abu Dhabi) harbors deep suspicion of Iran, in spite of very active trade ties. Iran is the enormous neighbor which the UAE cannot ignore, and from which it even gains much in economic terms, yet which looms large as a potential source of regional instability. Fear of a direct attack from Iran is not as worrisome for most Emiratis as fear of how Iran might react if attacked by a third party. An American or Israeli air campaign could generate retaliation from Tehran against proximate targets. The UAE provides just such targets -- including U.S. military assets and ports frequented by U.S. ships (Jebel Ali hosts more U.S. Navy ships than any other port outside of Norfolk, Virginia). The UAE is also host to at least 400,000 Iranians, some of whom gave a rousing welcome to Iranian President Ahmedinejad during his May 2007 visit. While the UAE balances its relations carefully -- taking caution not to offend

its large neighbor either by making pronouncements against Iran or by appearing to be too publicly allied with the U.S. -- it is always cognizant of Iran's ability to cause trouble if it so chooses.

¶13. (S) CONCERN OVER IRAN'S INFLUENCE IN BAGHDAD. Against this backdrop, the UAE has consistently worried about Persian influence in Iraq in recent years. Sectarian leanings in the GoI are a major part of this concern, making it imperative that we highlight the maturity of the GoI into a national leadership rather than an amalgam of sectarian interests -- although Shi'a may appear clearly dominant. The UAE's confidence in the GoI was set back yet again this spring when on the margins of an Arab Parliamentary Union meeting in Irbil the Iraqi Council of Representatives issued a statement (apparently under the auspices of First Deputy Speaker Khalid al-Attiya) suggesting that three islands under dispute between the UAE and Iran actually belonged to Iran. The UAE was taken aback by what it termed "the Irbil incident," which turned an "Arab consensus of 35 years' standing" on its head in a single statement. The Arab credentials of the GoI took a serious blow in UAE perception. Subsequent clarifications, including a letter to AbZ from FM Zebari, has set the record straight, at least on the surface. Continued vigilance by the GoI is required as it carefully balances -- as does the UAE -- its relations with Arab and Persian influences. Unnecessary incidents impede necessary cooperation.

¶14. (S) KEY UAE PLAYERS. Beyond his clear interest in a stable and prosperous region, UAE President Khalifa has not shown extensive interest in Iraq issues per se, although he is reported to have directed AbZ to visit Baghdad. Neither is Khalifa a frequent interlocutor with USG visitors. The meeting scheduled for General Petraeus on June 17 is an opportunity to thank the UAE for sending AbZ to Baghdad for a first hand look, press for the urgent naming of an Ambassador and opening of an active mission, and reiterate the need for Arab voices to be vocal in Iraq. Mention of debt relief or other specific policy issue need not be avoided in such a meeting, but should be touched upon lightly so as to avoid a sense of pressure that might be interpreted as the USG being more aggressive on behalf of Iraqi issues than Iraq itself. We should encourage al-Maliki, when a visit is arranged, to make careful use of his audience with UAEG leaders to make such points. During AbZ's visit to Baghdad he relayed an invitation from President Khalifa for President Talabani to visit the UAE. The invitation to PM al-Maliki was issued by his counterpart UAE Prime Minister (also VP and Ruler of Dubai) Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum. Both should be engaged on a similarly broad range of issues important to Iraq. Implementation of policy on many of those issues, however, will involve FM AbZ and his older brother Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ). Both are frequent interlocutors with U.S. visitors and both can delve into greater detail on practical policy issues. Another of the "sons of Zayed," former FM Hamdan bin Zayed, reportedly retained parts of the "Iraq file" when he left that post and was a frequent interlocutor of former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad. Hamdan has used his good offices to encourage dialogue between Iraqi factions, and is a worthy interlocutor on related issues, yet appears somewhat more distant from actual policy discussions than his brothers, MbZ and AbZ. MbZ (who we are told will unfortunately be out of the UAE during the FoI conference) has an added interest in military and defense issues, hailing from a military background (he is a Sandhurst graduate and helicopter pilot), holding the title of Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, and engaging U.S. and other visitors on practical issues of defense with much more precision and interest than any other UAE leader. As such, he tends to appreciate military visitors and is able to discuss Iraq rather practically. He is also a driving force behind getting military retirees into ambassadorial jobs -- and will presumably play a key role in naming one of that cadre as envoy to Baghdad.

¶15. (S) AFGHAN COMMITMENTS STRETCH THE UAE MILITARY. In putting UAE

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engagement with Iraq in perspective, it is critical to note that the UAE is active on a number of other fronts in the region which may limit the depth of its practical contributions to Iraq in the short term. For example, the UAE has contributed up to 250 Special Operations troops to the Coalition effort in Afghanistan for over five years, keeping the deployment somewhat under the radar screen



until the UAE invited a BBC documentary team to visit the troops earlier this year. The documentary, of course, focused on humanitarian efforts, although one of MbZ's oft-stated interests in sending Emirati Special Ops troops to Afghanistan is to get his military forces battle-hardened so they may effectively confront imported or domestic extremism when called upon to do so back home. The UAE pursues Afghanistan reconstruction aid with an emphasis on road networks, mosques, medical facilities and schools and has made efforts at political mediation between Pakistan and Afghanistan. It has helpfully offered the Afghan Army training, Mi-17 helicopters, and runway renovations. The point in terms of near-term efforts in Iraq is that a small UAE military is somewhat stretched already with Afghan operations and may not be interested in deep engagement with the Iraqi MoD for the foreseeable future.

¶16. (S) OTHER REGIONAL COMMITMENTS. The UAE provides significant humanitarian and security assistance to Lebanon and has been at the forefront of political and reconstruction efforts, continuing a longstanding de-mining operation, and contributing resources for school construction and hospitals. UAE Air Force C-130s and helicopters have been used in relief efforts. The UAE has also provided UAE-manufactured small arms to the Lebanese Armed Forces. The UAE has long sought to strengthen the Siniora government, including through significant financial assistance to Lebanon. The UAE would like to see tangible progress on the Middle East Roadmap, rejects the Hamas agenda, and continues to support the Palestinian people through more than \$400 million in housing and humanitarian assistance since 2000. UAE contributions in the region encompass all of the hot spots, further evidencing the UAE commitment to regional stability but also stretching UAE resources -- while financial resources may appear unlimited, personnel resources to support deeper engagement are stretched further with each new commitment.

¶17. (S) DEFENSE COOPERATION WITH THE U.S. The U.S. enjoys strong defense cooperation with the UAE, working together in key aspects of the War on Terror; the UAE has special operations troops on the ground in Afghanistan and has been a source of security assistance for Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority, in addition to assisting virtually every trouble spot in the region in need of reconstruction support. The nation provides critical basing and over-flight for U.S. reconnaissance and refueling assets, extensive naval logistics support, and the Navy's liberty port of choice in the region. We should routinely thank the UAE for its strong support of the U.S. military and encourage continued partnership -- a partnership that helps enable operations critical to our success in Iraq. A few quantitative measures of bilateral cooperation include:

- 1,800 USAF personnel at Al Dhafra Air Base;
- a vigorous training schedule at the al-Dhafra Air Warfare Center;
- 80 plans in the F-16 Block 60 program;
- approximately 425 port visits per year;
- over 24,000 US military overflights/landings annually;
- more than 150,000 U.S. servicemen and women enjoying liberty annually in the UAE annually; and
- About 250 UAE Special Operations forces currently serving with the Coalition in Afghanistan.

¶18. (C) GROWING DEFENSE TIES. The UAE appreciates the quality of U.S. military equipment and has a robust military sales portfolio managed by the U.S. Liaison Office (USLO) in Abu Dhabi. With anticipated procurements in the air defense arena in coming years, the value of this relationship may burgeon to around \$20 billion. The UAE leadership is always looking for more, quicker, and higher tech solutions to its defense needs and may raise those issues with U.S. military visitors regardless of the focus of the conversation.

¶19. (SBU) Note: Reftels are also a good reference for UAE (and particularly AbZ) thinking on Iraq-related issues. Of particular note may be recent developments captured in refs B and C from Baghdad and Ambassador Satterfield's ref E discussions in Abu Dhabi. End note.

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